

Rethinking History, Keith Jenkins, London: Routledge, 1991, 77pp., ISBN 0 415 06778 2

This short, polemical text is written as an introduction for students who are facing the question 'What is history?' Dr. Jenkins' argument is cast within the context of post-modernism - that movement which, with Lyotard, he sees as witnessing the 'death of centres' and displaying 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (p.60). Making a sharp distinction between the past (all that has taken place) and history (that which has been written and recorded about the past), Jenkins argues that historians must abandon the search for objective truth and come to terms with the fact that 'all history is theoretical and all theories are positioned and positioning' (p.70). Teachers of history therefore should give up their current emphasis on methodology and the scientific approach to the use of sources of evidence; the debate which has raged for some time in British educational circles as to whether or not the 'skills' of doing history are more important than the content is irrelevant. And teachers who attempt to give their students an empathetic understanding of the past are doomed to failure. The past is a foreign country, a lost world which we can never re-enter, let alone understand the attitudes and motives of the people who inhabited it. What matters, according to Jenkins, is understanding the processes of the production of historical discourse: that all the history we read, talk about or make is ideologically positioned and that it is there to serve some end.

Post-modernism is not a philosophy with which I personally feel comfortable. At its most extreme it seems to be claiming that there are no 'givens', no absolutes; that we can make no statements about the truthfulness or accuracy of one historical account as against another: Bryant is as good or as bad as Elton, Hexter no better or worse than Gardiner. Do away with the metanarratives and there is a danger, it seems to me, that the attempt of understanding and making sense of the world we live is doomed to failure. Post-modernism opens up the nightmare scenario of a universe without order, logic or sense. It is the philosophy of those who despair. Now this is not to argue that historical discourse can be contained within one framework or that because of the labours of professional historians the day will come when we will have reached the absolute truth about the past. But it is to say that we can make judgments about the quality of the historian's product - whether or not for example he or she has substantiated the narrative with carefully researched evidence, whether the opinion is soundly grounded on fact, whether the overall argument is coherent. No right-minded person will give credence to David Irving's account of the holocaust; no wise man or woman will deny the balance, impartiality and scholarship of Alan Bullock's biography of Hitler. We do have criteria which we will bring to bear when 'doing history' - and these are widely acknowledged by the community of historians.

So I find Dr. Jenkins' book worrying for he seems to have pulled the rug from under our feet and leaves us adrift. Certainly his text is challenging and thought provoking; but the brief 'solution' he gives

on page 70 to the problem of teaching history is unconvincing.

'If the present can best be understood as post-modern...then this suggests to me that the content of a preferred history should be studies of this phenomenon. That is, that the analyses of our modern world via the methodologically informed perspectives of post-modernism not only help us to locate all those present debates over 'what is history?' (who is history for?), but also provides us, at a moment in time that hinges between the old and the new, with what in a sense all these debates want: a context that will make an informed and workable answer to that question possible. In the post-modern world, then, arguably the content and context of history should be a generous series of methodologically reflexive studies of the makings of the histories of post-modernity itself.'

Structures, not processes; ideologies not content: I find this a strange recipe for a history curriculum, particularly for the younger student. I shall continue to emphasize with my students the skills needed to use a range of historical sources as evidence; I will continue, too, to engage them through drama, role play and other empathetic work with the strangeness of the past. And I will introduce them to the narratives of great historians - those who like Ladurie, Braudel or Schama have allowed us to catch a glimpse of the truth of another time, another place.

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